

Waging a war of position on neoliberal terrain: critical reflections on the counter-recruitment movement

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between neoliberalism and the contemporary movement against military recruitment. It focuses on the way that the counter-recruitment movement is constrained by, reproduces, and in some instances challenges the reigning neoliberal common sense. Engaging with the work of Antonio Gramsci on ideological struggle (what he calls a war of position), the paper critically examines three aspects of counter-recruitment discourse for whether or how well they contribute to a war of position against militarism and neoliberalism. While in many instances counter-recruitment discourse is found to be imbricated with neoliberal assumptions, the paper argues that counter-recruitment work around the poverty draft offers a significant challenge, especially if it can be linked to broader struggles of social transformation.

For more than thirty years, a number of peace organizations have waged a (mostly) quiet battle against the presence of military recruiters in American public schools. The war in Iraq brought these efforts to greater public awareness and swelled the ranks of counter-recruitment activists, as many came to see counter-recruitment as a way not only to contest but also to interfere directly with the execution of the war—by disrupting the flow of bodies into the military. While some of this disruption took physical form, as in civil disobedience or guerrilla theater to force the (temporary) closure of recruiting offices, much more of it has been discursive, attempting to counter the narratives the military uses to recruit young people. Indeed, counter-recruitment activists seek to go beyond short-term opposition to this or that particular war and to address the way that war becomes normalized through a culture of militarism, the way that people are acculturated to accept war as a reasonable or inevitable solution to conflicts. In this way, they seek to make future wars less likely. By locating the root causes of war in militarism, a set of beliefs and values legitimating war, the counter-recruitment movement (tacitly) suggests that the struggle against war is largely a cultural one, in which the goal is to alter the common sense around war and militarism in the United States. The counter-recruitment movement is thus engaged in waging what Antonio Gramsci calls a war of position. Focusing their efforts particularly on the public schools, counter-recruitment activists seek to disrupt the socialization of youth into the culture of militarism and thereby erode consent for war.

In this paper I critically examine the movement's attempts to wage a war of position on terrain defined not simply by militarism but by neoliberalism, and their mutual articulation, as well. The contemporary counter-recruitment movement is framed largely as a struggle to preserve individual choice in the face of an intrusive and coercive force. In this it echoes a core neoliberal precept. I thus want to ask: how has the counter-recruitment movement been shaped by, and in what ways does it reproduce, the individualism, privatization, and fetishization of choice that inhere in, or define, the neoliberal project? and what are the implications of this for the movement's struggle against militarism? I explore these questions by focusing on three sites of critique within the counter-recruitment movement: efforts to counter recruiters' "lies," to protect student and family privacy, and to contest what activists call the poverty draft. In each of these efforts the presence of neoliberal sensibilities can be felt, and I will argue, the attack on militarism is constrained as a result. In the discourse around the poverty draft, however, we will find a challenge to neoliberal common sense, and elements with which a movement could forge a weapon to wage a successful war of position against militarism and neoliberalism.

(Re)articulation and the war of position

Gramsci (1971) uses the metaphor of a war of position to underscore the importance of cultural struggle within civil society. Whereas a war of maneuver seeks to mount a direct assault on the state, a war of position decenters the state as a target of struggle, and focuses instead/also on the institutions within civil society (like schools) in which socialization occurs and consent is secured. A war of position is a struggle to change the way people conceive and act in the world; it is a struggle to change the common sense. Gramsci defines common sense as the largely uncritical and unelaborated conception of the world that is common in a particular era. Despite its historical specificity, the common sense of a given moment is nevertheless an amalgamation of disparate elements, including traces from the past which have become sedimented and bits of philosophy, science, or economic theory that have become popularized (326n8). The metaphor of sedimentation here is evocative: ideas sink down, settle, and become incorporated into the unconscious ways we apprehend the world, becoming part of our sensibilities and intuitions (see Jasper 1997, 154-9). The way we evaluate masculinity and heroism, for example, continues to be inflected by the Homeric model of the warrior-hero (Hartsock 1989), even as other elements have become overlaid and exert influence as well. Even as common sense remains uncritical, it, like all thought, serves as a guide for action, influencing "moral conduct and direction of will" (Gramsci 1971, 333).

Gramsci maintained a strong faith in the possibility that common sense could be developed into "good sense," through "renovating and making 'critical'" elements already present, but as yet unelaborated, within the thought of the day (331). This is not a matter of replacing one ideology or set of ideas with another,

nor less about imposing a new way of thinking. It does not create a new set of meanings or a new way of conception of the world out of nothing. Rather, it fashions a new critical conception out of the given elements, out of ideas, beliefs, and values already held amongst the people, only reconfiguring them, articulating them in a different way, emphasizing some over others, creating a new constellation and thus a new set of meanings. This is a process of (re)articulation. The elements in a given way of thinking are disaggregated and re-weighted so that what “was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken to be primary—becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex” (195). However much a particular configuration of ideas may have seeped into our unconscious ways of apprehending the world, infusing our common sense, it is and remains contestable. A new equilibrium is only momentarily achieved; it is fragile and contingent, and can be superseded through continued struggle.

Social movements are a central site in which this process can occur. In nurturing a certain oppositional knowledge (Woehrle et. al. 2008), in appropriating and delegitimizing dominant discourses (Steinberg 1999; 1998), or even in making certain frames resonant with existing values and understandings (see, e.g., Snow et. al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988), social movements often develop and disseminate a critical conception of the world. Whatever other changes they might seek, social movements are engaged in a struggle over meaning, over whose ways of sense-making will become widespread, accepted, dominant. For the counter-recruitment movement, this struggle is primarily against militarism.

Counter-recruitment as a challenge to militarism

The contemporary counter-recruitment movement has its roots in the peace and anti-draft movements of the mid-twentieth century. Organizations like the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCCO), which had provided counseling to GIs and draft registrants during the Vietnam War, persisted in these efforts even after the war and the draft ended in 1973. The threat of conscription was only momentarily suspended, however; in 1980 President Carter reinstated the requirement that all young men register with the Selective Service System upon turning 18, in case a draft should prove necessary. This spurred a new wave of anti-draft activism, linking draft resisters and peace activists from the Vietnam War era with the next generation of youth (e.g., Harris 1982). New organizations formed in this period, most notably the Committee Opposed to Militarism and the Draft (COMD) and the Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities (Project YANO), that together with the AFSC and CCCCCO, would help to define the counter-recruitment movement that emerged during the Iraq War.

Over the past few decades, countering military recruitment has meant countering the image of military life that recruiters propagate, countering their

promises of education, job training, and the relative safety of service with statistics and first-hand accounts to the contrary. But countering recruitment has also meant countering, in a deeper way, the “militaristic values” that underpin war. Counter-recruitment activists suggest that war is a result of the way Americans have been taught to think and the values they have come to assume. War is thus seen to result from a culture of militarism, which, as the COMD defines it, is “a value system that stresses the superiority of some people over others,” “derides cooperation, equality and nonviolence, and instead enforces strict hierarchical relationships.”¹ Although militarism, as a set of beliefs valorizing war, finds expression in a range of institutions and cultural artifacts, from film and music to sporting events and beyond (Lutz 2002; Gonzalez 2010; Sirota 2011), counter-recruitment activists have sought to challenge the spread of militarism by struggling over a key socializing institution: the public schools. Schools are one of the primary sites in civil society in which consent is secured, through the inculcation of a set of norms and values, and thus are an important site of struggle in a war of position. Indeed, counter-recruitment activists maintain that the military has made schools a decisive site of struggle through its encroachment into this space of youth socialization.

Since the shift to the all-volunteer force, the military has directed more resources to reaching students at school, and at increasingly younger ages. Army recruiters, for example, are expected—in the words of their own manual—to “effectively penetrate the school market. The goal is school ownership that can only lead to a greater number of Army enlistments.”² Military recruiters are instructed to find ways to make themselves indispensable to schools, by serving as coaches or chaperones for example; in many schools, they find a place in understaffed guidance offices. Rick Jahnkow (2006), a founding member of Project YANO, thus argues that the “ideal of democratic, civilian control is literally under assault as our schools are increasingly invaded by programs that teach military values, instead of critical thinking, to future generations of voters and government leaders.” He continues:

Teaching military values in civilian schools is not just grooming a few children to become future soldiers. It is...affecting the general public's increased acceptance of war as a valid response to the perception of attack. It is numbing the minds of civilians so that they do not ask even the most obvious questions when the government says we must invade another country.

By restricting recruiter access to school campuses and to students, and through counseling, classroom presentations and posing alternative notions of honor

¹ <http://www.comdsd.org/militarism.htm>, accessed 14 June 2010.

² United States Army Recruiting Command (USAREC) Pamphlet 350-13, quoted in Allison and Solnit (2007: 7).

and service, the counter-recruitment movement hopes to “defeat the militarism that is a threat to democracy” and to “defuse the most powerful military machine in the history of the world by depriving it of its most vital asset”: youth.³

Mapping the neoliberal terrain

If the counter-recruitment movement is concerned primarily with defeating militarism, it struggles today on terrain defined as much by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is most widely understood as an economic project of liberating the market from state interference, in which free markets, individual entrepreneurialism, and private property are held to be the key to social order and well-being (Harvey 2005; Foucault 2008). In practice it has been marked by state retrenchment, divestment in social provision and infrastructure, and deregulation of various industries, from finance to telecommunications to energy. This has not, however, meant a decline in overall state capacity; instead, the neoliberal era has been marked by a *shift* in state capacity, with the penal, warfare, and security apparatuses assuming greater prominence. We can see this with the prison boom and the militarization of the police (Parenti 1999; Wacquant 2009; Williams 2011), in the intensification of new technologies of warfare, or in an expanded surveillance apparatus which is increasingly and densely networked (Priest and Arkin 2010). If the prerogative dimension of state power, particularly in the US, has thus expanded and intensified dramatically under neoliberalism, it has also been transformed in important ways. We see this clearly in the way that the logic of military manpower procurement has changed since 1973.

Despite a great deal of worried speculation about a possible draft during the Iraq War, the Bush administration and top military personnel were committed to the all-volunteer force (AVF), as more efficient and effective than a conscript army would be. Writing in an op-ed to make this commitment clear, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2004) praised the volunteers who comprise today’s military and noted that “if it happened that we were to not have enough people to serve, all we would have to do is what any other organization would do — and that is increase the incentives and make military service a more attractive option for the best and brightest young people.” This was the same rationale that neoliberal economist Milton Friedman (1974) gave when he advocated the shift to an all-volunteer force in the late 1960s. Friedman suggested that military manpower procurement be based on market dynamics rather than state compulsion. If wages and benefits were increased to make the military an appealing economic choice for some, Friedman reasoned, the military would then be “manned by people who had chosen a military career rather than at

³ NNOMY, 2009, National Counter-Recruitment and Demilitarization Conference Packet Cover Letter, http://nnomy.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=224&, accessed June 13, 2011.

least partly by reluctant conscripts anxious only to serve out their term.” Lower turnover rates would enable more “intensive training” and thus the emergence of a “smaller, but more highly skilled, technically competent, and better armed force” (254). This vision of a small, streamlined, highly specialized, and technologically savvy force was shared by Rumsfeld, a Congressman at the time.

If relying exclusively on volunteers would result in a more effective military through market dynamics, Friedman also advocated the shift on the grounds that it would preserve individual freedom. A volunteer army would eliminate the “arbitrary power” of the Selective Service to “decide how a young man shall spend several of the most important years of his life—let alone whether his life shall be risked in warfare” (ibid.) As General Hershey, director of the Selective Service System during the years of the Vietnam War, had himself indicated, the central purpose of the Selective Service was not to send some young men off to war, but to “channel” a whole generation of young men into pursuits deemed to be in the national interest, through a system of occupational and educational deferments.⁴ For observers like Friedman, then, conscription did not just threaten the freedom of those called for induction, but all young men, whose choices were constrained by the logic of draft classifications and their attending requirements.⁵ Indeed, Friedman argued that the volunteer army (and more to the point, the market principles on which it would be based) would have positive effects throughout society, unburdening institutions of young men who would prefer to pursue some other line of work and quelling the conflict that state manipulation of life courses engendered (255-6).

With the shift to the all-volunteer force, individual choice may have been enhanced, but the military was faced with the problem of how to secure the necessary recruits especially at a time (the early 1970s) when the Army’s image was severely tarnished by years of an unpopular war, low troop morale, and rampant drug use, not to mention significant active-duty GI and veteran resistance (Cortright 2005; Moser 1996). The shift to the AVF thus also entailed a new era of military recruiting. The Army began to market itself using consumer research and advertising campaigns that tapped into youthful desires and cast military service in terms of individual opportunity—stressing educational opportunities, job training and advancement, equal pay for women, travel to Europe—rather than in terms of the obligations of citizenship (Bailey 2007; see also Allison and Solnit 2007). Both in the imagination of its most inspired proponents and in the way that the shift was effected in practice, the AVF can thus be understood as a reflection of an emergent neoliberal logic, wherein military service is made subject to market competition and individuals’

⁴ “Channeling Memo,” 1965; reproduced in pamphlet form by the Resistance, ca. 1968. Social protest collection, BANC FILM 2757, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵ In suggesting that the draft constrained choices, I do not mean to reify this critique (or common understanding) of conscription, but rather to underscore how the AVF fits the logic of neoliberalism. There were other critiques of the draft made from within the anti-Vietnam War movement that put greater emphasis on conscience and complicity (see Ferber and Lynd 1971).

maximizing calculations, and in which the logic of obligation, service, or sacrifice long associated with the citizen-soldier ideal is displaced.⁶

Counter-recruitment and the neoliberal common sense

It is important to stress that neoliberalism is more than a way of reconfiguring the relationship between state and economy; it is also a set of discourses and beliefs that have wide-ranging implications for how we apprehend the world and make sense of ourselves as subjects. Over the past forty years, neoliberalism has become “hegemonic as a mode of discourse” and thus “incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2005, 3). It has achieved this hegemony through a process of rearticulation, taking some of the central themes animating the mid-century critique of American society and articulating them with a celebration of enterprise and the free market. Themes of human dignity, freedom, and personal responsibility that had one meaning in the hands of the New Left (for example) were given an entirely new valence in the process (Harvey 2005, 5; Fraser 2009). Despite the many attacks launched against neoliberal institutions and policies, particularly over the past fifteen years or so, to the extent that neoliberalism has infused our common sense, it shapes how we reason, how we feel, and how we act. This poses challenges for any form of collective action, given neoliberalism’s intense individualizing and privatizing pressures, and in the following three sections, I explore what this has meant for the counter-recruitment movement.

That is, I consider how counter-recruitment activists engage, entrench, or challenge neoliberal common sense, by examining three key forms of counter-recruitment work: efforts to expose the fact that “recruiters lie,” to preserve privacy rights in the face of state encroachment, and to realize racial justice by challenging the poverty draft. In what ways are some of these approaches more fraught than others, more imbricated with neoliberal assumptions and modes of reasoning? Where might hope for an effective war of position lie, and what would it need to do? These are the questions that animate the following critical reflections on the contemporary counter-recruitment movement.

This discussion is based on a textual analysis of documents produced by the counter-recruitment movement. Treating the internet as an archive, I downloaded or otherwise saved copies of documents found primarily on organizational websites. To identify the organizations doing counter-recruitment work, I used newspaper and scholarly accounts (i.e., Tannock 2005) to compile an initial list and then constructed a snowball sample by following the recommended links on each organizational website. The organizations examined include: the National Network Opposing the Militarization of Youth (NNOMY), American Friends Service Committee

⁶ On the citizen-soldier ideal, see Moser (1996) and Snyder (1999).

(AFSC), the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCCO), Project YANO, Committee Opposed to Militarism and the Draft (COMD), Code Pink, and Leave My Child Alone!. While other organizations were included in the sample and in the analysis, I draw attention to these by name because they have all been influential in the movement in some way and together represent the range of the movement's different demographics and concerns. In addition to analyzing the documents and other content on these organizational websites, I have also examined published counter-recruitment manuals (Allison and Solnit, 2007; War Resisters League, 2006), as well as pieces in various progressive publications.

Telling the truth about recruiting

The single most recurrent theme in counter-recruitment discourse is that "recruiters lie." In seeking to delegitimize the military in the eyes of the public, and particularly among the youth who might be induced to enlist, counter-recruitment activists paint recruiters, and the military more generally, as dishonest, untrustworthy, and predatory. If military recruiters promise youth money for a college education, counter-recruitment activists point out that there are a number of conditions one must meet to qualify for the money—and few recruits do.⁷ If military recruiters promise that enlistees will receive job training that could open up a promising post-military career, counter-recruitment activists point out that few skills learned in the military are transferrable to civilian jobs, and that rates of unemployment and homelessness are high among veterans.⁸ In addition to countering specific claims recruiters make, counter-recruitment activists have sought to expose the military's marketing campaigns—manifest, for example, in television ads, video games, and Hollywood films—as attempts at "brainwashing," which threaten to "popularize soldiering and war" and erode democratic values and civilian control over the military (COMD 2003, Allison and Solnit 2007, 45-66).

This vein of counter-recruitment organizing thus takes the form of an exposé, revealing the hidden truth behind recruiters' slick claims and memorable slogans.⁹ Lynne Woehrle and her colleagues (2008) define efforts such as these as a particular form of oppositional knowledge which they call "counter-

⁷ According to the figures routinely cited by the counter-recruitment movement, only 35% of recruits receive any money for college and only 15% earn a college degree. See, e.g., Allison and Solnit 2007: 4, 98; NNOMY "Montgomery GI Bill," accessed May 19, 2010, copy in author's possession.

⁸ Project YANO. "The Military's Not Just a Job: What You Should Know Before Joining the Military." Available at: http://www.projectyano.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=22&Itemid=40, last accessed January 8, 2013. See also: Allison and Solnit (2007).

⁹ Since the start of the AVF, the Army's slogans have included "Today's Army Wants to Join You," "Be All You Can Be," and in the last decade, "An Army of One" and "Army Strong."

informative,” the goal of which is to share information that usually goes unstated so that the conversation might be broadened. Indeed, counter-recruitment activists see this as critical work: if students only ever hear the military’s sales pitch—its self-presentation as a conduit for upward mobility—then they cannot make an informed decision about their future. As Project YANO put it, “Our goal is to help young people see a different side to these issues so that they will have a more balanced picture and be able to make educated decisions about their future. We encourage them to think critically, search for more information, and then make up their own minds.”¹⁰ What should be noted here, however, is the way in which these efforts operate securely on terrain defined by neoliberalism. Military service is both presented and contested in terms of individual opportunity. Recruiters suggest that the military represents opportunity for youth and counter-recruitment activists respond that the military exacts a heavy individual cost, threatening not only the lives of youth during the years of their service, but their future prospects as well. Individual opportunity, they suggest, can best be pursued by avoiding the military at all costs.

In arguing against recruiters in their own idiom, counter-recruitment activists are clearly engaged in an attempt to delegitimize the former on its own terms. As social movement scholars, we tend to celebrate the volitional moment of movement activity, to emphasize movements as sites of agency, and movement participants as willful and conscious political subjects. Seen in this light, counter-recruitment activists are doing all that they can, using whatever means available to them, to prevent any more youth from falling into the clutches of the military.¹¹ If they can leverage a clear disjuncture—between the promises of military recruiters and the reality of life for recruits and veterans—to this purpose effectively, they will have scored a victory. At the same time, however, we need to be more cognizant of how those efforts are shaped and constrained. Marc Steinberg (1993, 319) describes this dynamic, and the tension at its heart, in terms of a dialogue between dominant discourses and those who “back talk” in championing another set of meanings and values:

Actors who seek to overturn the dominant ideological formations must seize opportunities where they find them, inflecting new meaning in the discourses of the dominant, and subverting their givenness in doing so. ... In view of the ongoing nature of dialogue [however], subversion from within leaves open the possibility that expropriated signs may be reappropriated, and that those who seek change may be recaptured by the entanglement of dominant meanings.

¹⁰ Project YANO. “About the Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities.” http://www.projectyano.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=26, June 13, 2010.

¹¹ The imagery used here is intentional: the military is presented as a predatory beast within some counter-recruitment posters and videos, and military recruiters have been likened to child predators. See, e.g., Hagopian and Barker 2011.

Thus, what looks like a smart, strategic attempt to exploit a political opportunity on the part of counter-recruitment activists may well/also be unconsciously inflected by, or entangled with, sedimented neoliberal assumptions, trapped within a neoliberal logic.

Indeed, like the AVF it contests, or the general neoliberal common sense with which it is in dialogic engagement, the counter-recruitment movement places great emphasis on choice. Tamara Nopper (2010), a sociologist and former volunteer with CCCO, in reflecting on how the style of military resistance has changed since the 1960s, notes that today “many counter-military recruiters treat young people like consumers who should make informed decisions based on whether the military is the best deal.” As such, they “simply give the other side of the story and, like Nixon, allow people to choose rather than offering a clear and explicit critique against war and the military, which is partially what Nixon sought to quell with his repeal [of the draft].” The work of exposing recruiters’ lies sets up this moment of choice, equipping youth with the information they need to make the best choice for their individual futures, but does little more. Indeed, it is entirely consistent with the logic of neoliberal rationality which “convenes a ‘free’ subject who rationally deliberates about alternative courses of action, makes choices, and bears responsibility for the consequences of these choices” (Brown 2005, 43).

The emphasis on providing the necessary information for youth to make informed choices about their futures, and thus take personal responsibility for what they do, reflects the influence of neoliberalism in another, more subtle way as well. In treating young people as consumers, counter-recruitment activists participate in reproducing market psychology, selling an alternative product to actors in the marketplace who seek to maximize their own individual self-interest. In selling their product—a different future, the importance of counter-recruitment work—counter-recruitment organizers have to be concerned with market share and appeal. They may not see themselves as entrepreneurs,¹² but their attention to framing nevertheless becomes an exercise in marketing. Many counter-recruitment activists are concerned with making their claims palatable and inoffensive, in order to appeal to a broad range of potential supporters. The counter-recruitment organizers interviewed by Harding and Kershner (2011, 101), for example, sought to frame their coalition’s work in “non-threatening, inclusive language,” and all agreed “that an anti-war or anti-military message [would] end up alienating the coalition from the community whose support it needs to survive.” While Harding and Kershner conclude that this approach can be credited with some of the movement’s successes, and should thus be

¹² In developing their theory of resource mobilization to explain the conditions giving rise to protest, McCarthy and Zald (1977) imported a number of concepts from economics. In the process they came to refer to movement leaders as entrepreneurs. While there may be good analytical reasons for exploring the strengths and limitations of this entrepreneurial metaphor, it is nevertheless problematic in the way it casts social movements as enterprises (with the attendant assumptions about interest-maximization and competition for market share) and eclipses questions of justice and morality that are at the heart of most movements.

emulated, I would argue that there is a clear disjuncture between activists' stated desire to confront militarism and a framing approach that eschews discussion of war. The next section explores this disjuncture in the context of the contemporary movement's most visible campaign.

Protecting family privacy

One of the central efforts of the contemporary counter-recruitment movement has been the Opt Out campaign, mobilizing high school students and their parents in an effort to safeguard their personal contact information. The Opt Out campaign was organized in response to a provision in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act that mandated that all schools receiving federal aid provide military recruiters with the same access to students and their personal contact information as given to college admissions offices or prospective employers.¹³ The campaign was framed almost entirely in the language of privacy and parental rights, and neither the war in Iraq nor the pervasive influence of militarism were made a central focus of critical engagement or debate. For example, Leave My Child Alone!, a group which emerged to contest this provision in NCLB, framed the issue this way:

Did you know...that the notorious No Child Left Behind Act includes a sneaky section that requires high schools to turn over private information on students to military recruiters? ... Yikes. What do we do? Any way you look at it, this is a family privacy nightmare, another strong-arming of our local schools, and a creepy warm-up to a possible draft.¹⁴

The tenor of the Opt Out campaign—the outrage over the provision mandating the release of personal information as a violation of privacy—is somewhat at odds with the fact that the law does not make a hard and fast obligation out of information-sharing but preserves an element of personal choice. Students and parents have a choice, expressively codified in law, about whether their contact information is shared with military recruiters. At one and the same time, NCLB requires that schools release student information to recruiters and provides students and parents with the recourse, the legally codified right, to prevent schools from doing so. The section of NCLB that mandates release of information also specifically provides that “A secondary school student or the parent of the student may request that the student’s name, address, and telephone listing not be released without prior written parental consent” and

¹³ Not Your Soldier “No Child Left Behind,” accessed May 19, 2010, copy in author’s possession. See also Project YANO “Campaign to Challenge Militarism in Schools” http://www.projectyano.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=45&Itemid=78, last accessed January 8, 2013.

¹⁴ <http://www.leavemychildalone.org/index.html>, accessed September 20, 2010.

that schools “shall notify parents of the option to make a request and shall comply with any request.”¹⁵ This was the opening in which the Opt Out campaign emerged.

The Opt Out campaign, like most counter-recruitment work, is waged largely at the local level. Groups work to educate students and their parents about their right to opt out, and in some schools, student groups have spearheaded efforts to get as many of their peers as possible to do so. Alongside these efforts, groups have lobbied school boards to revise their policies and streamline the process of opting out. In Oakland, California, for example, students and teachers were successful in convincing the school district to include an opt-out option directly on the emergency contact cards parents fill out at the start of each school year, as well as to offer students a form to opt out of a private recruiting and marketing database known as JAMRS.¹⁶

Older counter-recruitment organizations, which had focused their efforts on the presence of military recruiters in schools long before the passage of NCLB, understood the Opt Out campaign as one front among many. Their goal has been, not simply to secure family privacy, but to effectively demilitarize the schools, to turn schools into demilitarized zones.¹⁷ If the ultimate goal is to defeat militarism, the dominant strategy adopted by the counter-recruitment movement is to limit recruiter access to students, usually through effecting changes in school policies. While counter-recruitment activists have sought to restrict recruiter access to students through campaigns targeting JROTC programs and the presence of high-tech recruiting vans, obstacle courses, and rifle ranges on school campuses, the most common campaign, after Opt Out, has been one targeting the administration of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), a military jobs assessment test, in schools. The campaign against the ASVAB shares the same logic and framing as the Opt Out campaign, in part because the test is seen as a back-door way for recruiters to access student information, as student contact information is included with the test scores by default. In the materials that NNOMY distributes, for example, the issue with the ASVAB is presented as one of privacy and parental rights, not militarism. They object to the lack of choice and the lack of parental consent: “an important part of the equation...has to do with mandatory testing. 60,000 students in more than 1,000 high schools across the country were forced to take the ASVAB and had their information shipped to recruiters, many against their will and without parental knowledge.” NNOMY then provides this advice to local activists who want school districts to change their policies around the administration of the test:

¹⁵ Not Your Soldier “No Child Left Behind,” accessed May 19, 2010, copy in author’s possession.

¹⁶ <http://www.baypeace.org/curriculum-organizing>, accessed January 16, 2013. JAMRS, which stands for Joint Advertising Market Research Studies, is a database that collects a wide range of information on recruitment-age youth.

¹⁷ In 2006, the War Resisters League published an organizing manual, the title of which encapsulates this approach: “DMZ: A Guide to Taking Your School Back from the Military.”

You're simply arguing that the school should be abiding by federal laws that protect student privacy. ... *This is not about politics or imperialism or war. It's about privacy* and a constitutional clash between an overzealous federal agency and the rights of states and individuals. ... If you're truly committed to reversing the militarization of American youth, this is a great way to go. It's effective and it is quantifiable and we're winning battles across the country.¹⁸

For NNOMY, like the counter-recruitment movement more generally, the key issue to be addressed is militarism; their efforts are directed at demilitarizing the schools; and to wage a campaign against the ASVAB is seen as an "effective" and "quantifiable" way to address the militarization of youth. And yet, they counsel activists that the issue with the ASVAB is not "politics or imperialism or war," but privacy and parental rights. What might be a possible site for opening up a conversation about the role of the military in civil society, the national network of counter-recruitment activists counsels to keep as non-controversial as possible, at the expense of a moral and political debate about the central issue activists see themselves addressing: "the militarism that is a threat to democracy."

This might be an example of shrewd framing. If the movement is committed to "a long-term vision of incremental gains" (Harding and Kershner 2011, 102) and if persistence requires some evidence of efficacy, some "quantifiable" victories, then it may well be strategic to emphasize those talking points most likely to resonate with school officials. NNOMY wagers that privacy, and not a critique of war or militarism, will most likely achieve the desired result. As an immediate, practical matter, the approach has been effective: a number of schools or districts have agreed to make the test truly voluntary or to administer it on Saturdays. And the state of Maryland passed legislation that effectively requires students to *opt in* to having their test results shared with the military, as a matter of protecting student privacy (Castro 2010). One of the key organizers behind this effort was clear that a certain public image mattered in this campaign, saying "We never allowed anybody to suggest that we were anti-war people" (Harding and Kershner 2011, 94).

These policy victories are real and measurable, to be sure. They do serve to construct a wall, however much still much in progress, around schools that make it that much more difficult for recruiters to gain access to students. But a war of position is not simply about securing territory; instead, it is fundamentally about whose vision, whose conception of the world, will prevail. To argue in the name of privacy rights, and avoid any mention of war, secures little ground in a war of position against militarism. It alters little in the common sense.

Moreover these campaigns share a certain affinity with the logic of neoliberalism, and not simply in the anti-statism we see expressed in NNOMY's

¹⁸ NNOMY "ASVAB," emphasis added.

reference to an “overzealous federal agency” or in the more general fear that pervades these efforts. The affinity is also manifest in the very issues that counter-recruitment activists emphasize: choice and privacy. In suggesting that the No Child Left Behind Act represented a “creepy warm-up to a possible draft”¹⁹ and in using the language of “strong-arming,” Leave My Child Alone! suggests that the information-sharing provision in NCLB is an abrogation of individual freedom, a violation of choice, a moment of coercion. NNOMY suggests the same about the ASVAB in its description of students “forced” to take the test “against their will.” This argument finds supporters among libertarians and avowed neoliberals, because it resonates with core neoliberal precepts. It is a neoliberal framing, echoing what was once a central part of Friedman’s argument in favor of the AVF, the privileging of individual liberty over the obligations of citizenship. Here, in the context of these counter-recruitment campaigns, the choice is about whether to share contact information or not—and not much more.

In seeking resonance and broad appeal, this iteration of the counter-recruitment movement remains trapped within a neoliberal logic that elevates individual choice and privacy over the core moral issues that the war in Iraq raised. As Tannock (2005, 168, emphasis in original) put it, after two years of Iraqis facing devastation, torture, and death at the hands of the US military and subcontractors, “the US population, fed up with the actions of their nation’s political and military leaders, rises up and gets organized *to protect the privacy of their own children!*” While many counter-recruitment organizers may have been motivated by deeper moral considerations, by horror at what the US was doing in Iraq, and by questions of solidarity and conscience, these concerns were assiduously kept out of the public debate. This is in stark contrast with the approach taken, for example, by draft resisters in the Resistance²⁰ during the Vietnam War (Ferber and Lynd 1971) or Garrisonian abolitionists in the years before the Civil War (Olson 2007, 689) who made moral questions central to the debate, eschewed compromise on basic principles, and sought to “mobilize moderates by pressing them on their culpability,” forcing the latter to reflect on their own relation to the ongoing injustice of war or slavery and to choose a side.

¹⁹ It is not clear how the information-sharing provision within NCLB represents a step towards reinstating the draft, especially when we remember that all young men have been continuously required by law, since 1980, to register with the Selective Service upon turning 18 (<http://www.sss.gov/default.htm>). Creating a database of student information may enable recruiters to do their jobs more effectively, but were conscription to be reinstated, draftees would be culled from those registered with the Selective Service via a lottery system (<http://www.sss.gov/seq.htm>).

²⁰ The Resistance embraced a strategy of noncooperation, refusing to cooperate with the Selective Service by returning draft cards, relinquishing deferments, and refusing induction. They noted that the “American military system depends upon students, those opposed to war, and those with anti-Vietnam war politics wrangling for the respective deferments. Those opposed to war are dealt with quietly, individually and on the government’s terms.” (“We Refuse,” quoted in Ferber and Lynd 1971, 90). Rather than accept those terms, as the Opt Out campaign does, the Resistance embraced civil disobedience.

I would submit that this offers a more powerful model of a war of position against militarism than an approach that simply asks individuals to do what is best for themselves (opt out, don't enlist) but does not make them responsible for larger questions of social justice.

Confronting economic coercion

If the specter of coercion haunts the Opt Out campaign, despite the latter's execution of an expressly codified choice, it is more directly present in challenges to what counter-recruitment activists call the poverty draft. In the years immediately preceding the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, counter-recruitment activists were concerned with reaching the youth most targeted by the military: youth of color from poor and working class families. The Central Committee of Conscientious Objectors (CCCO), for example, made counter-recruitment a key part of its work. The organization had offices in Oakland and Philadelphia, and worked to reach out to the youth of color, in part by developing collaborations with political hip-hop artists and producing the magazines BLU and then AWOL that conveyed an anti-militarist message through interviews, poetry, art, and first person accounts of struggle both within the military and in other arenas of life. In San Diego, a town saturated with military institutions and personnel, the Committee Opposed to Militarism and the Draft (COMD) and Project YANO reached out to Latino youth in particular. They tried to tap into cultural notions of community, honor, and service and to show alternative ways those could be enacted outside of the military. They suggested alternative models of manhood as well, holding up Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez as exemplars of strong men who spoke out against militarism.²¹

These organizations developed a critique of the poverty draft: they pointed out that divestment of schools and deindustrialization had left inner-city youth with few options and argued that this proved fertile ground for recruiters. As CCCO organizer Mario Hardy put it, recruiters could point to the problems of unemployment, drug abuse, high rates of incarceration, and violent crime in kids' neighborhoods and pose the following scenario: "you're either going to wind up dead or in jail, here's \$50,000, you sign right here and your future is as good as secure."²² There is very little choice involved in such a scenario; the decision to join the military is coerced, given economic circumstances and objective life chances. Hence, the notion of a poverty draft.

The poverty draft was the primary issue around which Not Your Soldier, a youth-led project affiliated with the War Resisters League, also organized. Not

²¹ Project YANO. "So You Want to Be a Man?" Available in English and Spanish at: http://www.projectyano.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=28&Itemid=53, last accessed January 8, 2013.

²² Network X. "Militarism in the Schools: Counter-Recruitment Conference," February 3, 2000. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57Yra-RlNK4>, last accessed January 8, 2013.

Your Soldier defined the poverty draft, where the “majority of military recruits come from below-median income neighborhoods,” as “the result of the unfair setup where opportunities are systematically eliminated in the communities that need them the most, while the military continues to get more and more funding.” The poverty draft does not work just through the systematic elimination of opportunities; it also relies on aggressive, predatory recruiting methods, and the lies that were discussed above:

Military recruiters are out in full force in the neighborhoods that are hurting the most, preying on the lack of opportunities. They want us to believe that the only option for us is to join up. They say we’ll be safer at war overseas than on our block. They’re promising college tuition, job training and adventure. ...

What recruiters don’t tell us is that 75% of blacks and 67% of Latinos report experiencing racial discrimination in the military. They skip over the fact that 1 out of 3 women in the military reported being raped. They never mention that the college money is hard to come by—only 16% of enlisted personnel who completed four years of military duty ever received money for schooling. They don’t say that the job skills they promise won’t transfer into the real world. Only 12% of male veterans and 6% of female veterans use skills learned in the military in their current jobs. And of course, they downplay the risk of being killed while on duty.

As is common across the movement, Not Your Soldier counters the lies and omissions of military recruiters here, but they also move beyond the moralistic condemnation that “recruiters lie” to a more systemic analysis:

We have decrepit schools, bad housing, limited job options and poor healthcare. Despite our serious needs, the government spends more money trying to convince us to join the military than on basic human needs like education.

The Pentagon dropped \$13,000 recruiting each person who enlisted. Compare that to the \$1,115 that is spent on education per student, and you’ve got a pretty clear picture of the government’s priorities.

Thus, in the discourse around the poverty draft, (some) counter-recruitment activists situate military recruitment in a context of structural inequalities and suggest that the issue is not one of misplaced priorities, but of a deliberate, systematic elimination of opportunities for some communities so as to ensure that the military continues to meet its manpower needs in the absence of a (*de jure*) draft.

By speaking of a poverty draft, they emphasize how neoliberal policies of divestment and state retrenchment funnel certain youth into the military, and they denaturalize the ostensible fairness and neutrality of the market. In doing so, they raise a challenge to neoliberalism and the structural inequalities it

exacerbates. At one point in time, Johnson's War on Poverty and Great Society visions readily acknowledged racial and class disparities, however imperfect and inadequate the efforts to address these problems might have been. Now, however, structural inequalities are rarely recognized as such. Sociological thinking has become harder to find in public debates, where individual initiative and personal responsibility are offered instead as answers to structural problems, in keeping with the logic of neoliberalism. In parallel, the neoliberal era has led to a narrowing rather than expansion of possibility, despite Martin Shaw's (1991, 184) expectation that the end of conscription would open horizons, enabling young men to imagine a future beyond an early death in war. Coinciding with the advent of the neoliberal era, the shift to the AVF has not meant that at all. If young men no longer need to contemplate an early death in war, many are nevertheless contemplating bleak job opportunities, long stints in prison, and/or an early death on the streets. For young working class women, and particularly women of color who are disproportionately represented (among women) in the military, the future looks little better. This is what counter-recruitment activists underscore when they invoke and critique the poverty draft.

The notion of a poverty draft offers a critique of the material moment of neoliberalism, the effects and logic of neoliberalism in practice, but does so partly within a discourse defined by neoliberalism itself. In mobilizing the language of a draft, activists thereby invoke its obverse: choice. If a poverty draft exists, and by definition contravenes choice, then it is an abrogation of individual liberty that must be decried. While other invocations of choice by the counter-recruitment movement reproduce (or at least do not challenge) neoliberal assumptions, I would suggest that the particular articulation of choice here can be thought of as a form of immanent critique, using neoliberalism's own sacred tenets against its applications and effects. The AVF, the neoliberal military, was premised on free market principles and offered as an alternative to the channeling that defined the Vietnam generation. And yet, counter-recruitment activists argue, individuals continue to be channeled by economic coercion and predatory recruiting—and so, choice, which is sacrosanct in neoliberalism, is not being preserved. At the same time, these activists push further, challenging the racial and class inequality on which the poverty draft is based.

Neoliberals are entirely comfortable with inequalities in outcomes, and American neoliberals, in particular, would be inclined to read racial and class inequalities as evidence of differential rates of (familial or individual) investment in human capital (see Foucault 2008). At the 2009 NNOMY conference, Nancy Cruz, a counter-recruitment organizer then in high school, offered a pointed and poignant challenge to this logic. Noting the differential access to information and resources across different educational tracks within her school, Cruz argued that students should teach one another, sharing their resources and what they know with one another. She was talking about the importance of this for counter-recruitment work (recounting how they had

managed to remove JROTC shooting ranges from San Diego schools), but also implied that it was a larger matter of racial and class justice. She continued:

You make things personal, because when you make things personal, it's like, 'oh they're challenging you.' So what I told people was that they think that you can't go to college. 'Oh, what, I can't go to college?' Like, right, you get that attitude, you get that fighting attitude out of people. 'They're putting this program into your school because you're not valued as people in other schools.' Right? So you start getting people to think more.

The notion of choice is invoked in Cruz's presentation—that students should have the choice as to which classes to take, or whether or not to go to college—but here it is explicitly linked to a critique of who and what is valued in society. Though Cruz does not reference the poverty draft by name, she is very clear that it exists: "We're in an economic crisis. This is the time where recruiters recruit the most. Why? Because we don't have options. I have talked to so many friends that have said that they're going into military because they can't find work, they can't afford school, and they don't have anything going for them."²³ The point of counter-recruitment work for Cruz is to create other options for youth, and while she suggests that this can be done in part by mobilizing familial networks and spreading knowledge through them, there is also an unmistakable sense that it will require, and be an exercise in, racial and class solidarity.

On its own, the critique of the poverty draft still falls short of really addressing militarism, as a set of beliefs valorizing war, but it is the most promising aspect of the counter-recruitment movement because it offers a systemic analysis and raises fundamental questions of justice. If the critique were developed out, and articulated with other struggles for racial justice and community self-determination, it could form part of a powerful challenge to the mutually reinforcing nexus of militarism and neoliberalism. CCCO made some of these linkages; we see these efforts expressed in its collaboration with hip-hop artists and in its newsletter *The Objector*.²⁴ But CCCO was largely defunct by 2009 (despite having existed continuously from 1948 onward); the Not Your Soldier project was short-lived; and there is no clear mention of the poverty draft in NNOMY's resource materials, despite the fact that as the national network of counter-recruitment groups, it was tasked with disseminating resource materials for the movement. The organizational backbone supporting these

²³ AFSCVideos. "2009 NNOMY Conference – Nancy Cruz"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=14whj5KcACY&list=PL8DD41705E76C2CDF&index=4>,
last accessed January 8, 2013.

²⁴ See, for example, the Summer 2003 edition entitled "Operation American Lockup" and which explored surveillance, immigration detention, and the policing of queer communities and communities of color.

challenges to the poverty draft, and by extension (or in the process) neoliberalism and structural inequality, has crumbled.

Nevertheless, these efforts could be revived.

Social movements remain one of the key actors in the contemporary world that can transform common sense into good sense. But to change how people conceive the world, what they value, and how they act, takes more than framing issues in a resonant way (e.g., appealing to individual opportunity) or achieving discrete policy changes. Each youth who chooses not to enlist and each school district that makes opting out easier does represent a victory that should not be minimized or dismissed. But we should not confuse these with the deeper changes in the very way that people apprehend the world that the war of position seeks to effect. The counter-recruitment movement is clear that it seeks to make war untenable—unthinkable—by eroding its cultural support. To truly root out militarism, however, will require that activists push beyond the inoffensive approach that we see widespread in much (though not all) counter-recruitment work and find the courage to have the hard conversations.

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